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Ray HITCHINS, *Vibe Merchants: The Sound Creators of Jamaican Popular Music*

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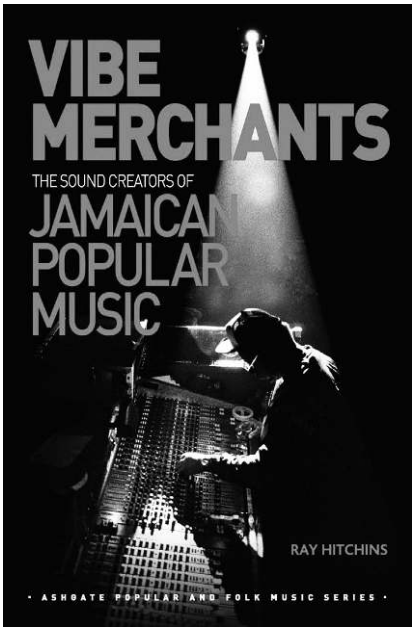
Ray Hitchins, *Vibe Merchants: The Sound Creators of Jamaican Popular Music*, Farnham, Ashgate, coll. « Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series », 2014.

In his book's introduction, based on his PhD dissertation, Ray Hitchins explicitly states that he intends to fill a gap located exactly at the intersection between two fields: the history and analysis of Jamaican popular music on the one hand, and research on the relationships between technology and music production on the other. Through nine chronological chapters covering the whole history of recorded music in Jamaica, his aim is thus to provide a detailed depiction of the recording techniques available in Jamaica since the founding of its first studios, of the actions and interactions of the people who used them, and then, eventually, of the resulting structure, functioning and evolution of music production. All of these analyses are especially centered on the focal point of the audio-engineer and his primary tool, the mixing console. If Hitchins naturally uses the existing and reference works on Jamaican popular music history, his most novel and fruitful material comes from two specific sources. First, he has gathered fresh and original information from first-hand interviews and discussions with crucial actors of the Jamaican music scene who had been little—if at all—considered until then: audio-engineers, starting with the very first of them, Graeme Goodall and Donald Hendry, who were active in the 1950s. Second, and this probably gives him an unprecedented position in this academic literature, Hitchins relies on his own thirty-year experience as a musician in Jamaica. And indeed, one of the most convincing and enjoyable traits of his book is the natural familiarity and the deep comprehension with



which the author presents how music is actually made, i.e. turned into records, in studios in general, and in Jamaican ones in particular. This enables him to offer significant contributions to both research fields within which his work is inserted.

First and foremost, as for the history of Jamaican popular music, Hitchins provides for the first time detailed and contextualized descriptions of recording and mixing sessions, giving an extremely clear picture of how music is made in Jamaica. The accounts and analyses of the

recording sessions for Laurel Aitken's *Boogie in My Bones* (in chapter 3) or of the "building" of the *Sleng Teng* riddim, maybe the single most important musical product in Jamaican history (in chapter 5), already make this book a must-read for anyone interested in Jamaican popular music. And they constitute only a small part of the history Hitchins relates of the technical evolutions of Jamaican music, and of the concrete material he collected on how it is made. For these contributions only, *Vibe Merchants* is without doubt one of the reference works on Jamaican popular music history. Moreover, compared to most existing books dealing with this topic, a distinguishing feature of Hitchins's is its very neutral or objective approach, maybe due to his focus on technical aspects. Indeed, most of the existing literature on the topic is influenced—and sometimes even clearly biased—by strong individual preferences and opinions, especially polarized by the mid-1980s historical rupture between the "Golden Age" of roots reggae and the riddim-driven digital dancehall—the latter period most often being treated with disinterest or disdain: for example, in his very informed classic book, Bradley (2001) devotes only three chapters out of 23 to post-mid-1980s production, and begins them with a quotation from reggae musician Dennis Bovel: "when computers came in, that's when the amateurs took over" (Bradley, 2001: 501). However, while explicitly participating in this debate, Hitchins avoids the disputes about the musical or cultural values of post- and pre-1985 Jamaican music, to focus on the very technical and related organizational aspects of the evolution of music making. In particular, in his fifth chapter, he convincingly contradicts the widespread view that the 1985 turning point is a question of technological changes, with Jamaican music then becoming "digital" or "computerized" — terms often used with a "derogatory" connotation (103). He argues that Jamaican popular music remains in the 1980s and 1990s "analogue," that is to say "recorded using analogue microphones, analogue mixing consoles and multi-track analogue tape recorders" (106). And if digital instruments (mainly drum machines and synthesizers) are more common in the late 1980s than in the mid-1970s, it is the result a gradual evolution, not of an abrupt rupture. And finally, dancehall's distinctive mixing technique—what Hitchins calls "performance mixing" —is directly inherited from 1970s practices, and especially from B-sides and dub.

Secondly, besides its importance for the understanding of Jamaican music history, Hitchins's book also deserves to become a reference work for anyone interested in the links between technology and musical creation. Through the Jamaican example, the author very convincingly demonstrates how the range and types of recording and mixing techniques available shape the intermediate but crucial space located between artists and musicians on the one end and pressed records on the other—where the audio-engineer finds his place. And Hitchins shows how this space can be a creative one, if the audio-engineer has the technical tools and the statutory capacity to take on a real artistic role. He is not the first one to investigate the relationship between technology and music, with research in this field being particularly active today—and he actually puts his own work into perspective with previous literature on the subject, for example, with Chanan (1995), Katz (2004) or Greene and Porcello (2005). His main

contributions to the field are twofold. First, he offers a description of the overall evolution of the technologies available and of their use in a specific musical milieu. This enables understanding not only of how technical possibilities shape musical production processes at a given time, but also of how they shape a genre's evolution. Secondly, he—rightly—underscores the role of the people practically using available techniques: producers, musicians, artists, and, above all, audio-engineers.

Besides all these qualities, Hitchins's book main weakness is that, probably because of his very deep focus on the Jamaican case, it lacks a more comprehensive discussion of the insertion of its analyses and conclusions in the general scholarly debate about the role of technology and audio-engineering in music production. But his in-depth study of the Jamaican case nevertheless constitutes a significant contribution to this field.

Thomas Vendryes

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Jim Rogers, *The Death & Life of the Music Industry in the Digital Age*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2013.

L'étude de Rogers (Dublin City University) retrace l'influence du développement numérique sur l'industrie musicale au sens large, laquelle excède la simple industrie du disque (tant par son ampleur économique que par la variété des acteurs qu'elle mobilise). L'auteur s'inscrit en faux contre l'idée répandue qu'internet a révolutionné, en la détruisant, l'industrie musicale (i.e. les majors). Il s'attache à démontrer les limites, voire l'infertilité radicale, du cliché de la « révolution numérique » (telle qu'elle a notamment été médiatisée par les procès iconiques contre Napster et autres plateformes de téléchargement illégal). À travers sept chapitres relativement brefs (en moyenne de trente pages chacun), l'auteur avance la thèse qu'internet a seulement « transformé » l'industrie musicale et se propose de mesurer en quoi cette dernière